

CASE REPORT

Fever and generalised lymphadenopathy in an HIV-positive patient: a diagnostic challenge

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SUMMARY

Fever and generalised lymphadenopathy is a common presentation of a variety of diseases and a thorough investigation is often necessary for appropriate diagnosis.

We present a 53-year-old male patient admitted with fever, weight loss of 15 kg in 3 months and abdominal discomfort. Examination was only remarkable for axillary and inguinal lymphadenopathy. Blood tests showed normocytic normochromic anaemia, cholestasis and a previously unknown HIV-1 infection with lymphocyte CD4 +count of 239 cells/mm³ and viral load 3.172.370 copies/mL. A body CT scan showed multiple axillary, mediastinal, lumbar, aortic, iliac and pelvic lymphadenopathy as well as hepatosplenomegaly. An excisional biopsy of the left axillary lymphadenopathy was performed and histology ultimately revealed multicentric Castleman's disease associated with Human Herpes Virus-8. After initiation of antiretroviral therapy, rituximab was given and progressive clinical improvement occurred.

BACKGROUND

Fever and generalised lymphadenopathy are frequently seen on HIV-positive patients, especially those who are unaware of their diagnosis. Because the differential diagnosis is broad and variable according to the degree of immunosuppression, a systematic approach should be taken to achieve a proper diagnosis. Infectious diseases including HIV infection itself and malignant lymphoid neoplasms are the biggest concerns with any patient with this presentation. On this clinical case, we illustrate a thorough clinical investigation that ended up on a rare but treatable entity, making this an educational clinical case. This is also a report of a successful clinical response of rituximab on this rare clinical condition.

CASE PRESENTATION

A 53-year-old male patient, Angolan, currently living in a malaria-endemic region of Ethiopia, was admitted with fever, asthenia and abdominal pain. He had been well 3 months before he developed intermittent fever, malaise, anorexia and diffuse abdominal pain. He noticed weight loss of 15 kg for the last 3 months and referred no other symptoms. His personal and familiar history was unremarkable and no travelling outside from Ethiopia was noticed before his presentation in a Portuguese hospital, 7 days after travelling from his country.

On examination, he was febrile (38.5°C), blood pressure was 110/80 mm Hg, cardiac frequency 90 bpm, respiratory rate 18 cycles per minute. Lung sounds were clear and abdominal examination was only remarkable for unremarkable hepatosplenomegaly. Several axillary and inguinal mobile masses were noticed, the largest with 3 cm diameter on left axilla, without associated skin findings.

INVESTIGATIONS

The admission blood tests results showed normocytic normochromic anaemia (Hb 8.4 g/dL), leucocytosis with lymphocytosis (17.000x10⁹/L and 9.100x10⁹/L, respectively), platelets 163.000, peripheral blood smear was negative for parasites or any other abnormalities, C reactive protein 11 mg/dL and slight elevation of phosphatase alkaline and gamma-GT with a normal bilirubin. Protein electrophoresis showed a broad-base gamma peak and a bone marrow aspirate was performed showing 15% plasmacytes with a normal myeloid/erythroid ratio. Uroculture, sequential blood cultures, myeloculture both for bacteria and mycobacteria, acid fast bacilli staining and leishmania direct examination and PCR were all negative.

On the first days, haemoglobin decreased to 6.9 g/dL despite transfusion and brief haemodynamic deterioration occurred. At this time there were no clear signs of haemolysis, namely increasing lactate dehydrogenase, increasing unconjugated bilirubin or low haptoglobin, and the direct Coombs test was also negative. Because blood loss was a concern, upper endoscopy and colonoscopy were then performed and showed no abnormalities. Laboratory findings were also not consistent with adrenal failure and the patient spontaneously improved with no further therapy. A body CT scan was performed at this time and revealed multiple lymphadenopathy: mediastinal, hilar and, lumbar and aortic (figure 1).

The patient kept relapsing fever with no other complaints. An initially ordered fourth-generation HIV test was positive, which was later confirmed with positive western blot for HIV-1 infection. Lymphocyte T CD4 +count was 239 cells/mm³ and viral load was 3.172.370 copies/mL.

Venereal Disease Research Laboratory (VDRL), Epstein Barr virus (EBV), cytomegalovirus (CMV), toxoplasmosis, hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) serology were all negative for recent infection.

A surgical biopsy was then performed on the left axillary nodal conglomerate which ultimately



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Figure 1 Body CT scan showing multiple lymphadenopathy.

showed a various lymphatic nodes with preserved nodal structure and involution of the germinal centres, interfollicular regions filled with plasmocytes and proliferating vascular growth. In some of the germinal centres and mantle zones, isolated and aggregated plasmablasts could be seen, expressing human herpes virus-8 (HHV-8), monotypic for lambda light chains. The remaining interfollicular plasmocytes were polyclonal. This findings were consistent with HHV-8-positive variant of multicentric Castleman's disease (MCD) (figure 2).

DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

Most of the series of generalised lymphadenopathy on HIV-positive patients come from the pre-antiretroviral therapy (ART) era or from countries where tuberculosis is endemic, making mycobacterial infections the first cause of generalised lymphadenopathy on this population.¹ Because this patient came from Ethiopia, a country where tuberculosis is still endemic, this diagnosis must be ruled out. Tuberculous lymphadenitis is the most common extrapulmonary presentation of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* infection and tends to occur inversely to CD4 +lymphocyte count. Cervical lymph nodes are the most common site and in 35% of patients multiple localisations are involved.²

Other *Mycobacteria* species infections could also have similar presentations. *Mycobacterium avium* complex infections are

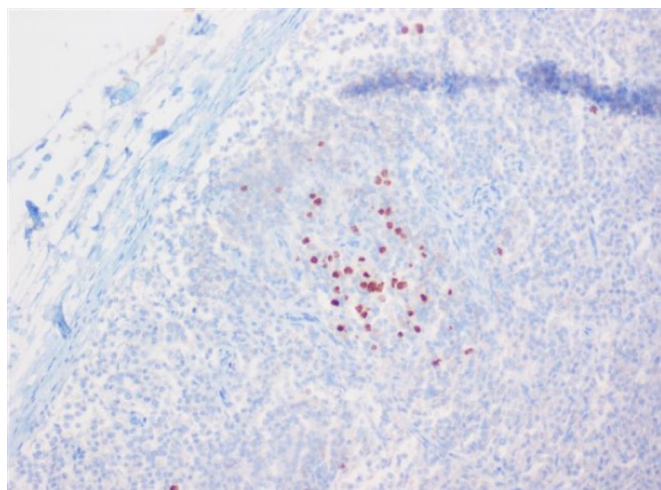


Figure 2 Lymph node biopsy showing diffuse plasmocyte infiltration with positive staining for HHV-8, human herpes virus-8.

frequently associated with severe anaemia; however, generalised lymphadenopathy is less frequent and one should expect a lower lymphocyte CD4 +count (eg, <50 cells/uL).³

Blood and bone marrow cultures and in this case lymph node biopsy would be helpful for the diagnosis of mycobacterial infections.

HIV infection itself could be responsible for the clinical symptoms, either by acute or chronic infection. Acute viral infection was not present in this case because a positive western blot implies an infection of more than 3 months and also the symptomatology is consistent with a more indolent disease. Chronic HIV infection with this degree of immunosuppression could account for constitutional symptoms and generalised lymphadenopathy; however, this diagnosis should only be made after excluding other entities.

The slow onset of the clinical complains makes most bacterial and other acute infections less likely, however, HBV, HCV, Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), cytomegalovirus (CMV) and toxoplasmosis should be ruled out as they can present with similar complaints.

Visceral leishmaniasis could explain this clinical picture, specially fever and hepatosplenomegaly. Lymphadenopathies are however a rare finding in this entity.⁴ For proper diagnosis, direct visualisation of parasites on bone marrow smear or positive culture are required.

Lymphoma is always a concern in any patient with lymphadenopathy, especially those with HIV infection. Such patients have higher risk of developing lymphomas and highly aggressive non-Hodgkin lymphomas such as Burkitt lymphoma and diffuse B cell are common.⁵

Classically, the risk of developing lymphoma is proportional to the degree of immunosuppression with median lymphocyte CD4 +count 200 cells/mm³ at diagnosis.⁶ Some types of lymphoma are specially related to HIV infection, such as plasmablastic, oral cavity, pleural cavity lymphomas and HHV-8 related Kaposi sarcoma.⁷

Differently from HIV-negative patients, lymphomas usually present more acutely and on a highly aggressive way on HIV-positive patients, being more advanced at diagnosis and more frequently with associated B symptoms (ie, fever, weight loss and nocturnal sudoresis).⁸

An uncommon entity that can be easily confounded with a lymphoma is MCD, where lymph node histology is essential for establishing the correct diagnosis.

TREATMENT

After diagnosis, antiretroviral therapy (ART) was initiated with efavirenz, tenofovir and emtricitabine with good tolerance and significant improvement of symptoms and anaemia. After 1 month, rituximab was then initiated (375 mg/m² weekly during 4 weeks) and an impressive response was observed on lymphadenopathy. Anaemia and weight also improved after four doses of this drug and no adverse effects were observed during the treatment period.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

During the 8-month follow-up period, no adverse effects were noticed and symptomatology improved considerably with weight gain, haemoglobin improvement and lymphadenopathy resolution. After 5 years of follow-up, the patient is alive and without any evidence of recurring disease nor evolution into lymphoma.

DISCUSSION

Castleman's disease is a heterogeneous group of rare diseases which have in common augmented production of interleukin 6 with lymphoid hyperplasia. Both localised or unicentric and multicentric forms exist, being the later more commonly associated with HHV-8 and also with HIV infection. Annual incidence of MCD is 8.3/10.000 patients per year, a number that has raised after rising after the introduction of ART.⁹

Clinical presentation of multicentric disease is usually undistinguishable from a lymphoma with generalised lymphadenopathy and hepatosplenomegaly. Its pathophysiology is still not fully understood; however, HHV-8 plays a role as it is commonly found on biopsies.¹⁰ Laboratory markers are unspecific, presenting commonly with anaemia, thrombocytosis, elevated erythrocyte sedimentation rate and hypergammaglobulinaemia. Histological hallmark includes a polyclonal plasmocytary expansion with normal nodal structure and HHV-8 identification which is almost always present on HIV-positive patients.¹¹

Although it is a benign histological entity, MCD accounts for significant morbidity and mortality, either because of bacterial infection predisposition or for the risk of developing associated malignancies such as Kaposi sarcoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.¹² Histology in this patient additionally showed increased expression of lambda free light chains, a finding that had been suggested to be linked to increased susceptibility to developing a high-grade lymphoma.¹³

Because it is such an uncommon diagnosis, treatment experience is still sparse and only based on observational studies. In

HIV-positive patients, treatment with rituximab showed good results with an overall low relapse rate and with acceptable safety profile.¹⁴ Patients with low CD4 + counts and high viral loads should start ART before rituximab to decrease viral load. Some authors suggest the addition of chemotherapy to rituximab on severe cases including those with end-organ failure; however, benefit is still not clear comparing with rituximab monotherapy.¹⁵

Contributors BN has written the majority of this paper and had the greatest contribution (70%). PR reviewed the paper and contributed with some parts (20%). PF contributed with some parts of the paper (10%).

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Learning points

- Fever and lymphadenopathy is a frequent presentation of a variety of diseases and intensive investigation should be performed to achieve a proper diagnosis as many important and life-threatening conditions can present this way.
- HIV infection should be ruled out in these situations especially in patients coming from endemic areas.
- Differential diagnosis should take in account the level of immunosuppression but ultimately many conditions should be considered.
- Multicentric Castleman's disease is a rare entity that required a histology diagnosis and should be considered in patients with HIV with unexplained fever and generalised lymphadenopathy.
- Treatment of this condition is still not consensual but rituximab either on monotherapy or associated with chemotherapy has been showing good results.

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